

THE POETRY OF TYAGARAJA

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If Tyagaraja had not been the versatile musical genius he was but had presented his compositions to the world as devotional or didactic songs, would he still enjoy the same reputation he does today in the realm of Karnatak music? Had his pieces not been such marvels of coalescence of art music and melodic richness but were mere hymns clothed in simple but lilting melodies (like his *Utsava Sampradaya Kritis* and *Divya Nama Kirtanas*), would he yet be deemed eligible for the place of honour he occupies in the musical world? The answer to both these questions is in the affirmative. Although Tyagaraja was, first and foremost, a musical composer and a creator of new expressions and forms in music, the fact that he was a competent poet and a master of felicitous expression has added great charm to his compositions and made them virtually "poems set to music". He is often referred to as the 'tone-poet of Tiruvaiyaru'. For a similar reason, Kshetrajna became immortal even though he composed only one type of musical composition, the *padam*. Tyagaraja's *kritis* are rightly renowned for their poetic excellence, sublimity of thought and unsurpassed *yati* and *prasa* (caesura and alliteration) beauties not found in the compositions of any other South Indian composer. The perfect integration of the *sahitya* with the music of his pieces was accomplished because of his inherent poetic faculty and impassioned feeling expressed in imaginative verse.

The beauty of the language to which music is set has a great deal to do with the permanence and popularity of the music. The language of

song, however, differs from the language of poetry and the diction of a *vaggeyakara* is bound to differ from that of a poet. We can see this difference clearly if we compare the *slokas* of the *Gita Govinda* in which *ashtapadi* songs figure. Jayadeva adopts a distinctly different style for the *ashtapadis*, which are intended to be sung to a given *tala*. The diction most suited for music has to be euphonious and composed of words which are soft, flowing and melodious, with no harsh or discordant combination of syllables to grate upon the ear. The songs of Tyagaraja are unrivalled for their sweetness, musical beauty and their simple language. Moreover, the sentiments of the songs, philosophical and ethical, and the profundity of his meditation have endowed his *kritis* with such rare merit that many Telugu scholars read them for the sheer delight of reciting them without any concern for their complicated tunes or intricate *talas*.

Tyagaraja displays considerable poetic gifts within his limited scope as a *vaggeyakara* or composer of music. Among the celebrated major composers of Karnatak music, he is, perhaps, the only one who can be called a poet barring Kshetrajna, who stands as a class by himself. There is a school of thought among Telugu scholars that maintains that Kshetrajna composed his *padams* as *lakshyas* to the *lakshanas* of the various types of *nayakas* and *nakakis* enumerated in a Telugu work called the *Sringara Rasa Manjari*. Tyagaraja revels equally in gorgeous descriptions of heaven and the celestial beauty of the Lord who resides there as in his pen picture of the village Tiruvaiyaru (of his time) and the river Kaveri which flows nearby. *Dorakuma* in *Bilahari* is one of the pieces in which Tyagaraja excels himself in describing in ornate language the abode of his God with angels and liberated souls enjoying the supreme bliss of His presence. The three *charanas* of this *kriti* comprise a rapturous outpouring which will dispel all doubts regarding Tyagaraja's mastery over Telugu idiom and the grandeur of his poetic conception. The first of these *charanas* which gives a description of Heaven and the Lord who resides therein bears this out:

*Tumburu Naradulu suguna
kirtanambula nalapamu seyaga
Ambarisha mukhyulu namamu*

seyaga jajulu pai challaga
Bimbadarulagu suravara yali venulu
natyamu ladaga
Ambujabhava pakaru liru gadala
nanvaya birudavalini bogadaga
Ambaravasa satulu kara kankanambulu
ghallani visaraga maniha-
rambulu gadalaga nuche phanitalpambuna
nalakonma harini ganugona.

In a few *kritis*, we are able to see that Tyagaraja was not merely a writer of conventional devotional verse with a command over the diction peculiar to music composers but was quite at home in describing the beauties of nature. The *kriti*, *Sari vedalina* in *Asavari* is an artistic little piece which will do credit to any poet. Tyagaraja describes the river Kaveri as “an undefiled virgin flowing now in torrents, now as a roaring rapid and now as a tranquil and compassionate stream.”

Duramuna noka tavuna garjana bhikara
moka tavuna nindu karunato
Niratanuga noka tavuna naduchuchu
Vara Kaveri Kanyakamani.

Affectionately chiding Rama for developing hauteur after being installed in his house at Tiruvaiyaru, Tyagaraja in the *kriti*, *Muripemu* in *Mukhari* gives us a poetic description of his home town with “its matchless breeze, fragrant flowers and the sweet music of koels which make it the most delightful place on earth to live in.”

Iduleni malaya marutamuche
Gudina Kaveri tatamandu
Sakala sugandharaja sumamulu
Salalitamagu kokila nadammulu
Imahilo sogasaina chola simayandu
Varamaina Panchanadapura.

It is clear from Tyagaraja's own description of a *kriti* in the song *Sogasuga Mridanga* that he conceived of a *kriti* as a poetic composition not only in form but also in substance. The description is delicious:

*Yati visrama sad bhakti virati
draksharasa navarasa
yuta kritiche bhajiyinchu
yukti Tyagarajuniki tarama.*

“A *kriti* should have *yati* (caesura), *visrama* (repose) *sad-bhakti* (devotion), *virati* (pause) and all the nine *rasas*.” The former are the requirements of prosody and the *rasas* are the sine qua non of any poetical composition.

There is no written or oral tradition to indicate the extent of Tyagaraja's scholarship and his proficiency in Telugu and Sanskrit, but a scrutiny of his *kritis* and *padyas* shows that he was competent in handling Telugu verse and was a good scholar in Sanskrit. As he spent almost his entire life in Tamil-speaking areas, it would perhaps be presumptuous to suppose that he had a mastery over the classics (*maha kavyas*) in Telugu but tradition has it that he was performing daily *parayana* of the *Andhra Bhagavatam* by Potana. There is no doubt that Tyagaraja was deeply influenced by Potana when he started composing verse in simple Telugu without any pedantry or straining after effect. Telugu scholars vouch for the fact that the language of his *kritis* reminds them of verses in the *Potana Bhagavatam*. Tyagaraja does not hesitate to imitate the style of his illustrious forbear nor to borrow ideas from him. The *kriti* “*Ennaga manasuku rani*” in *Nilambari*, occurring in his opera *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam*, is based mainly on two *sisu padyas* figuring in the seventh *skandham* of *Potana Bhagavatam* commencing with, the words “*Kamalaksha narchinchu karamulu karamulu*”.

*Ennaga manasukurani
Pannaga sayi sogasu
Pannuga ganugonani
Kannulele Kanti minnulele*

is obviously inspired by Potana's verses in the *Bhagavatam*.

*Kamalakshu narchinchu karamulu karamulu
Srinathu varchinchu jihva jihva.*

Strangely enough, many of Tyagaraja's longer pieces (excepting the *Pancha ratna kritis*) are to be found not in praise of Lord Rama, but in

praise of the different Goddesses worshipped by him during his pilgrimage to various shrines. His *kritis* in praise of Dharmasamvardhani of Tiruvaiyaru, Praviddha Srimati of Lalgudi and Tripurasundari of Tiruvottiyur are outpourings with a truly poetic ring about them. In the *kriti Sundari Ninu in Arabhi* on Goddess Tripurasundari, he revels in poetic fervour in comparing Her face to the moon, Her majesty to the mountain Meru, Her splendour to the lightning and so on.

Kalakalamanu mukha kalalanu gani
Kaluvala raju bhumi ki radaye
Chelagu ni lavanyamunu gani
Yalanade Valaraju ganaka poye
Niluvaramagu ni gambhiramunu gani
Jalaraju jada veshudaye
Balamaina dhiratvamuni gani
Kanakachaludu ta silarupudaye

Similar descriptions are found in *Darini telusu konti* in *Suddh asaveri* and *Vidhi sakradulaku* in *Yamuna kalyani*.

A correct assessment of Tyagaraja as a poet can perhaps be made only after a thorough study of his two operas *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* and *Nowka Charitram*. In these two works we see quite a different facet of the genius of Tyagaraja. It is in these musical plays that he has dispelled all doubts regarding his competence to write verse. A scrutiny of these reveals his easy mastery over all the common metres of Telugu poetry like *sisu padyas*, *kandapadyas*, *dwipadas*, *utpalamala*, *champakamala* and *sardulavikriditam* and also *darus*, *dandakam* and *gadya*. He also exhibits remarkable skill in working up a climax by means of a long *padya*, culminating in a *kriti* of chiselled beauty in a *raga* most appropriate for the situation.

In the *kriti Chudare Chelulara in pantuvarali* in his opera *Nowka Charitram* he gives a gorgeous description of the river Yamuna flowing near Gokulam:

“Bees hover around pink lotuses being wafted by the breeze on the dark blue waters of the Yamuna dotted with sand dunes white in colour. The steps look as if they have been paved with

diamonds. Swans swim on the rippling waters. The bowers are full of vine with multi-coloured parrots feasting on the grapes. The cuckoos sing in the trees and Cupid is busy aiming his flower-darts at men and women."

He prefixes this *kriti* with a long explanatory verse in *Sardulavikriditam* thus :—

*Valayambuga nataladuchu jelul-
Varninchuchum neguchum
Alolambagu pushpa vrishamulto
Hamsi sanuhambuto
Gilalambuna bhrunga nada yutamou
Kendammi brundambuto
Galambhodhara diptitoda jelage
Galindinin ganchuchum*

Although the verses and other passages in pure Sanskrit composed by Tyagaraja do not fall under the category of poetry, a scrutiny of them and his *kritis* in Sanskrit reveals his remarkable command over the language. Tradition is again lacking regarding his exact scholarship in Sanskrit, but his pieces do not leave us in any doubt about his mastery over Sanskrit diction in his role as a music composer. In *kritis* like *Jagadananda karaka* and *Vara Lila Gana Lola (divya nama)* he uses rare Sanskrit words with telling sound effects and indulges in ingenious and difficult compounds. He can also, at the same time, write easy-flowing passages like the Sanskrit *charanas* of the *kriti Ni Daya Ravale* in Todi producing striking effects of the second-letter rhyme (*dvitiyakshara prasa*) which he invariably uses in his compositions.

*Sara sara kantara chara mada vi
Dara sundarakara suguna suku-
Mara maramana nirajaptakula
Paravara sudharasa purna.*

As a matter of fact, a thorough study of his Sanskrit pieces will greatly benefit any one who desires to improve his knowledge of that language.

In short, we have in Tyagaraja a rare combination of a musical genius who could clothe his beautiful creations in art music in equally beautiful language, thus making them a perennial source of inspiration and delight to generations of music lovers. One can say of him what Ramesh Chandra Dutt wrote about Jayadeva "in his compositions the Sanskrit loses its august stiffness and assumes more than Italian softness."

T. S. Parthasarathy is an authority on Karnatak music in general and of Tyagaraja in particular. He is a well-known linguist, music critic and author and was examiner in Karnatak music in the Karnatak University, Dharwar. Publications include collections of the kritis of Syama Sastri and Mutusvami Dikshitar and a Tamil translation of Tyagaraja's opera "Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam". His latest is Tyagaraja, with a full Tamil translation, which was released recently during the Tyagaraja aradhana celebrations at Tiruvaiyanur. The translations of seven Tagore plays have been published by the Sahitya Akademi. He is a Director in the Indian Railways.

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Hero as Composer (Tyagaraja) by T. V. Subba Rao, 1945, Souvenir of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Hyderabad, Dn.

Tyagaraja by P. Sambamoorthy, (Tyagabrahma 'Mahotsava Sabha Souvenir 1940).

Raga Swarupa and Tyagaraja's Kritis and 2 musical maps by Sambamoorthy and articles on Tyagaraja by others (Sri Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha Souvenir, 1942).

Cauvery, Tamil Monthly, Kumbakonam, Special Number for Tyagaraja's Festival (1942 Jan.) contains articles on Tyagaraja's life and his contributions to Indian Music.

Parupalli Ramakrishnayya Pantulu, 61st Birthday Presentation [Volume (contains articles on Tyagaraja by Sir S. V. Ramamurthi and Parupalli Ramakrishnayya Pantulu).

Addresses delivered at the inauguration of the Aradhana Festival of Tyagaraja at Trivadi, Tanjore.

An Address on Tyagaraja delivered in March 1945 by P. Sambamoorthy under the auspices of Kalakshetra and published in the Journal, *Theosophist*, June 1945.

A series of articles on Tyagaraja contributed to the *Hindu* by C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, M. S. Ramaswamy Ayyar, Dr. T. Srinivasa-
raghavan, Harinaghabushanam, P. Sambamoorthy and others.

The Journal of the Madras Music Academy, and the Souvenirs of its Conference contain articles on Tyagaraja.

Daily Express Annual (1925) contains an article on Tyagaraja by C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar.

Songs of Tyagaraja in notation

Sangita Satsampradaya Dipikai (Tamil) edited by Setlar V. Rangaswamy Ayyangar, 1912-1913, Vepery, Madras (also contains songs in notation from Panchataleswaram Vina Nilakanta Sastriyar).

Gana Vidya Prakasini (Tamil) 1915-17.

Swadesamitran Weekly : Madras (Contributions by C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Umaiyaipuram Venkatarama Ayyar and Turaiyur Rajagopala Sarma).

There are many instances of *later composers* writing *sahitya* to the *dhatus* (tunes) of *Tyagaraja kritis*.

- (a) For the tune of the *kriti* Sripate, *nagaswaravali raga*, Subbarama Dikshithar has composed the *sahitya* Srivallipate (Sri Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini), Vol. II, page 5 of the Anubandham (B).
- (b) For the tune of the *kriti* Etulabrotuvo Teliya in *Chakravakam*, Patnam Subramanya Iyer has composed the *sahitya*, Etulaurasi Yunnado.

Compositions in praise of Tyagaraja

Dhyana Slokas in Sanskrit by Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavathar.
Mangalashtakam by Venkataramana Bhagavathar.

Adi Gurustotra Panchangam in Telugu by Venkataramana Bhagavathar.

A piece in Manipravalam (Sanskrit, Telugu and Sowrashttra) by Venkataramana Bhagavathar.

Kritis

Swamiki Sariyevaranavacchu (*devagandhari*)

Gurucharanam bhajare (*Bilahari*)

Sadguruswami (*Ritigaula*)

Tyagarajaswamiguruni (*Karaharapriya*)

Sri Tyagarajaswami Mahimanu (*Vachaspati*)

Ehi Sargure (*Kamas*)

Nadabrahma (*Nadabrahma*)

Ininamakkoru (*Bilahari*)

Sri Tyagaraja Ashtottara Sata Namavali by Bangalore Nagaratnammal (1940).

Srimadavi Tyagaraja (*Kalyani*).